Chapter 5
Partners with God

God-friendship is for God-worshipers; they are the ones he confides in (Ps 25:12).
—The Message

Linda was recently reading the book of Exodus. God spoke to her through the "pillar of cloud" imagery from that book and she shared with me:

> The Israelites had to wake up every morning check "the cloud" everyday to see if they are moving or staying. My first response to reading that was "that sucks." You never know what's going to happen. How do you get anything done? How do you settle down? Then Lord said to me, "well, would you like to stay somewhere I'm NOT?" When He put it to me like that, my response was "I want to be where you are. If you want us to go, I'm ready to go.[1]

Linda and I have lived in seven different cities in our twenty-nine year marriage. We've listened for our "marching orders" and tried our best to follow the Lord. Linda is naturally more of a "settler" and I'm more of an adventure seeker. We've tried to submit to God and one another and move when the cloud is moving.

Worship at its core is about relationship with God. As we have seen in the last chapter, prayer is a vital element of that relationship. Across the next few pages we will look at what it means to know and worship God and *do life* with him and for him. This is the pattern for all the great worshipers of the Bible and all the outstanding figures in church history—they listen and obey. I'll share a few stories in this chapter about very specific direction we've received from God, about the way that we—and others—have been worshipping and watching for the cloud.

An Ordinary Man

In Luke's account of the birth of Christ we meet Simeon, simply described as " … a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout … " (Luke 2:25 NLT). He is not a priest or prophet, he holds no official office. Yet Luke says Simeon " … was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel … " (Luke 2:25 NLT) and that " … the Holy Spirit was upon him" (Luke 2:25 NLT). His heart was tuned in to the priorities and plans of God. He was the kind of man who made a habit of listening to God.

The Lord had promised Simeon " … he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah" (Luke 2:26 NLT). On the day Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the temple to dedicate him, " … the Spirit *led him* [Simeon] to the Temple … "(Luke 2:27 NLT, emphasis added). How exactly did the Spirit lead him? We'll never know. Perhaps

Simeon just *knew* he had to go the temple that day. We do know that when Mary and Joseph showed up, Simeon was there.

Simeon took the baby in his arms and praised God, saying:

> Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel! (Luke 2:29-32 NLT).

Simeon was a common man who loved God with all his heart. His deep devotion made him ready to receive the Lord's messages and he had cultivated a lifestyle of responding to the urgings of the Spirit. For Simeon, following an impulse from God to go to the temple on this day was natural.

God is looking for today's equivalents of Simeon: "a woman who lives in Chicago who is righteous and very devout" … "a teenager who lives in Atlanta who is righteous and very devout" … "a man who lives in Hong Kong who is righteous and very devout." As we respond to the ideas God plants in our thoughts, He will set up divine appointments like the one Simeon had with the newborn Jesus. Then we became messengers for the Lord.

Here's a fact for you: God speaks to ordinary people. Moses wasn't an eloquent speaker, but he "spoke with God as a man speaks to his friend" and then led God's people to freedom from slavery. Along the way, God led Moses with specific instructions.

David, a renowned worship musician and psalmist, was conscripted to lead Yahweh's armies. He received specific instructions from God at crucial moments as a leader. He had no plans, no strategy, and no greater wisdom than dependence on God's direction.

Paul, the apostle, had a conversational relationship with God. Jesus commissioned him to go to the Gentiles, and spoke to him many times on his missionary journeys, telling him where to go and where not to go, and what he could expect in certain places. God spoke to Paul about both the big picture of his life and about specific day-by-day plans.

Intimacy and Obedience

Partners talk about the work they do together. Like any good Senior Partner, God lets his partners in on the process of planning, making decisions and moving forward. Any wise manager cheers on his workers and points them in the right direction with encouraging words. Yet these days we talk less about God being some kind of Senior Partner figure and instead the expression "intimacy with God" is commonly used these days to describe close friendship with God. Many of our worship songs paint pictures of intimacy with God—hearing his voice, feeling his presence and knowing him more deeply. But how can we really hope to be "intimate" with God?

Respect, reverence and obedience are at the heart of this intimate relationship. When applied to our relationship with God, ”intimacy” has a different shade of meaning than for human relationships. Intimacy with my wife, my kids and my mother, while similar in some ways, all are unique. All these relationships resemble my relationship with God but are also very different.

One of the most powerful books in Scripture on friendship and intimacy with God is John’s gospel. In chapter 14, Jesus promises to be intimate with his disciples: “And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever” (John 14:16). And a few verses later, “ … He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (John 14:21). These are great promises—God says he will be close to us!

But that’s only part of the story; Jesus only promises to be intimate with those disciples *who obey him.* In chapter 14, Jesus says the same thing *three times* in a row. He’s really trying to make a point here.

> If you love me, you will *obey* what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor … (John 14:15-16, emphasis added).
>
> Whoever has my commands and *obeys* them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be *loved by my Father*, and *I too will love him* and show myself to him (John 14:21, emphasis added).
>
> Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will *obey* my teaching. My Father will *love him*, and we will *come to him and make our home* with him” (John 14:23, emphasis added).

For Jesus, true love for God is expressed in obedience. Usually we put the emphasis of God’s unconditional love, on the fact that he loves us in spite of our failings. As true as this is, it’s not the whole story.

In the verses above Jesus is saying to his disciples, and to us, “do you want to be intimate with me, close to me? Then do what I say. Do you want to experience my love, receive revelation from me? Then do as I say.”

We have many songs these days about being in the Father’s warm embrace and being filled with His comforting Spirit. I love those songs. But in our culture of narcissism, we could be led to believe that intimacy with God is all about *feeling* loved. It’s as if we believe that if *we can get a warm, fuzzy experience in worship then we have been intimate with God*. I really enjoy every *feeling* that comes from worshiping Jesus, but friendship with God is bigger than that. Feelings make for a lousy compass.

> You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn’t confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. You didn’t

> choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name (John 15:14-16 NLT).

In this particular passage, there is a strong connection between being a *friend* of God and bearing fruit. If the energy of our life is devoted to obeying God (v. 14), and sharing God's love (v.17), *then* Jesus calls us his friend.

Jesus describes his ongoing conversation with his Father: "For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he is doing …" (John 5:20). This is in the context of Jesus' healing ministry. Jesus couldn't do anything without the Father.

Jesus said he came not to do his own will, but the will of his Father who sent him. To get his marching orders, Jesus listened to his Father. And his Father spoke. This was a very natural exchange between Father and Son. Family members talk to one another—that is how they express their love, and share their lives together. That is how covenant relationships are lived out.

If we were doing our best to love God with all our heart and love our neighbor as ourselves, why *wouldn't* he speak to us to help us on our way? God doesn't expect us to undertake the mission of serving him in an isolated state of *ex-communicado*.

Specific Instructions Given to Paul

In Acts 16 we see Paul traveling through the region of Phrygia and Galatia. They had been *"* ... the Holy Spirit had prevented them from preaching the word in the province of Asia … " *(*Acts 16:6 NLT). When they were opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, " … *but again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there*" (Acts 16:7 NLT); so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night *Paul had a vision*: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him, and saying, " … *Come over to Macedonia and help us*!" (Acts 16:9 NLT). When he had seen the vision, he immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced God had called them to proclaim the good news to them.

God clearly communicated to Paul and his traveling companions. In his partnering with Jesus, Paul needed to get his marching orders from the General of the army. While on his way to Jerusalem, the Lord warns Paul of hardships: " … in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me" (Acts 20:23).

As a creative person, I have lots of ideas and many of them are bad ones! Last year I had an idea to do a series of Christmas worship concerts. It seemed like a good idea. I contacted a few friends about forming a band for these events, and I made a list of churches to contact to present the idea.

When it was time to start sending emails and making phone calls to book these events, I didn't feel right about it. Several times I sat down to begin the process of contacting

people, but I kept getting a feeling God was holding me back. In hindsight, I'm so glad that I followed this hunch. When December came around and I had finished a very heavy season of travel, I desperately needed a break. After an exhausting three months of ministry on the road, I wouldn't have had energy for a series of Christmas concerts. God stopped me from going overboard with my idea factory. I wish I could say I've always stopped long enough to hear him say "no." God has given "hunches" to his people throughout history to help them make the right decisions.

To hear the whispers of God, we simply have to listen. We have to be smart enough to know that we don't know all the answers. To rush into doing our own plans without listening for God's input is presumptuous. I frequently pray "Lord, keep me from going down the wrong road. Keep me from striving to accomplish my plans when you have a better idea."

Others who Listened

Philip was a disciple who was actively engaged in preaching the gospel, another man who knew what it meant to respond to the words of Jesus. As a man of action in God's kingdom he was poised to receive instructions from the Lord. Here we see a remarkable story of specific guidance: "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. *So he started out …* " (Acts 8:26-27, emphasis added).

Understanding that it's always a good idea to obey when God instructs, Philip went down the road and met a court official of the queen of Ethiopia. Then God spoke again: "The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it'" (Acts 8:29). God gave Philip *very specific instructions.* And *as he obeyed*, God gave him more information.

I've found that it works this way in my life. I respond to a word from God, or at least what I perceive to be a word from God, and after step one, he gives me step two. I usually make a lot of mistakes along the way, but he faithfully re-directs me.

King David was another one who received specific instructions from God. David was trying to figure out where to live, so he asked the Lord, " … David inquired of the LORD. 'Shall I go up to one of the towns of Judah?'" he asked. The LORD said, "Go up." David asked, "Where shall I go?" "To Hebron," the LORD answered (2 Sam 2:1). David needed to know where to live, so he simply asked God.

In 1983 I was driving out to Twentynine Palms, California to visit my wife who was visiting her mother. Along the way the Lord told me "go help at the new Vineyard in Santa Barbara." It seemed like a clear word. So we drove up to Santa Barbara to meet with the pastor. Before long, we moved there and I became a volunteer intern pastor while my wife worked as a nurse.

Several years later, we were living in Canada. While visiting Anaheim, the Lord spoke to me about moving again. While driving onto a freeway onramp, God said, "someday you're going to live here." That was the last thing I expected. I was just about to begin a new job as a senior pastor of a church in Surrey, British Columbia. Four years later, we moved to Anaheim where I worked in a large Vineyard church.

I've joined up with Jesus and his cause. I'm doing the best I can to follow him. He gives me fuel for the journey by speaking to me in a myriad of ways. Dallas Willard says "our union with God consists chiefly in a conversational relationship with God while we are each consistently and deeply engaged as his friend and co-laborer in the affairs of the kingdom of heaven."[2]

His speaking is not as loud and frequent as I would hope, but as I look through my journal and see what he has said, I see how strong and consistent his words are. Of course, his still small voice is only one way that he speaks. His written word is alive and powerful, always available, and always relevant in directing my life. And the counsel of friends and elders is indispensable.

Moses Receives Ongoing Encouragement

I can think of few people in the Bible that heard from God more than Moses. Moses had a difficult life-assignment from God; he was to lead a huge group of grumbling people through the wilderness. It didn't matter how many times God spoke to Moses along the way he needed ongoing encouragement.

After numerous miraculous revelations and miracles—the command to set the Hebrew people free, his staff that morphed into a serpent, manna from heaven, and water coming from a rock, just to name a few—Moses asked to see God's glory. He wanted reassurance that God's presence was still with him.

We all need that reassurance, over and over again. We don't stand head and shoulders above the crowd like Moses did, but we are no less God's *friends.*

As a father, I am delighted when I see my kids taking initiative to care for their younger siblings. When my kids were younger, I would heave a sigh of relief when an older brother rescued a toddler from an impending fall and injury. "They're getting it!" I'd say to myself. In these moments I thanked my maturing teenagers, cheering them on, giving them more reason to keep showing compassion. I guess this is just a pale reflection of the way that God sees us.

One word that God has spoken many times to us is "I have called you here." I find it very encouraging when God reminds me that I'm in the right city and the right church. Recently, I was attending a Bible study and God's presence came to me in a beautiful, unexpected way. Again he spoke those words: "you are in the right place."

Moments of revelation stay with me for a long time. When God personalizes his word to us—when he speaks directly to us in our spirit—we are powerfully strengthened, encouraged and comforted.

---

1. Linda Park, "Personal Communication."
2. Dallas Willard, *Hearing God, Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 56.